



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
John J. Pershing VA Medical Center

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2015 – PB – 01



<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



Poplar Bluff Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and clinics, both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010, which called into question the standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center - John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans report positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persist among veterans with the customer service they receive at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a "secret shopper" program for veterans—formally named the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans' organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Poplar Bluff region facilities.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 28, 2015

To the Director of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center,
Members of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Poplar Bluff region. When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I wouldn't be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I meant it then, and I mean it now. In this first Summary Report, Missouri veterans showed satisfaction in some categories, such as respect shown by Pershing VA staff and facility cleanliness, while noting room for improvement in other areas such as appointment wait times and overall experience. Still, I remain encouraged because with this report we are taking the first critical steps on the path to increasing veterans' confidence in the Missouri VA. By including the voices of Poplar Bluff veterans and bringing their concerns to the VA, we can better respond to their needs.

I appreciate the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to striving for improvements to ensure veterans have nothing but positive experiences while at Missouri VA medical centers. I know that leadership at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns noted in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support from my partners at the Pershing VA and several Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri's VA medical facilities.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

Kristen Wright
Cindy Hall
Jason Rauch
Nick Rawls

Would you like your voice heard?

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the Poplar Bluff region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans visiting VA medical centers in other regions in the state were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as Pershing VA or VA) through the period ending April 13, 2015. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the Pershing VA;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the Pershing VA;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the Pershing VA;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the Pershing VA to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the Pershing VA; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA, and submitting other concerns identified on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised of Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of *care*.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders, and the VA worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA facility regarding the quality of *customer service*.

Scope

The scope of this review included those VA facilities located in the Poplar Bluff region through the period ending April 13, 2015. In the Poplar Bluff region, ninety (90) veterans completed the entire survey during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Modern Warfare, Disabled Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their

customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Senator McCaskill's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, excluding any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all completed surveys were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations who reviewed comments to be included in the report. Reported comments were chosen based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the given statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement presented, the comments missing key information to draw a conclusion, or volume.

Survey questions and response options have been written to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Survey questions appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a scale spanning 1 through 5, where "5" indicated Strong Agreement and "1" indicated Strong Disagreement.

Limitations

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 13, 2015. During this period, ninety (90) veterans completed the survey for the Poplar Bluff region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented, with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty-four percent (64.4 %) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated that they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	1.1%
Korean War	4.4%
Vietnam War	64.4%
Desert Shield/ Desert Storm	15.6%
Iraq/Afghanistan	17.8%
Other	10.0%

Veterans also specified which VA facility they visited. Over half of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center in Poplar Bluff. Some veterans indicated that they received services from multiple facilities at the Pershing VA. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received care:

John J. Pershing VA Medical Center	53.3%
Cape Girardeau CBOC	20.0%
Farmington CBOC	8.9%
Paragould, AR CBOC	0.0%
Sikeston CBOC	3.3%

West Plains CBOC	16.7%
Other	12.2%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Pershing VA. Ninety (90) veterans reported using the following categories:

Primary Care	40.0%	Emergency Room	4.4%	Extended Care	1.1%
Outpatient Clinic	11.1%	Mental Health Services	7.8%	Dental	1.1%
Pharmacy	6.7%	X-Ray	7.8%	Laboratory	17.8%
Travel/Enrollment	8.9%	Main Lobby	10.0%	Specialist Visit	16.7%
Inpatient Care	3.3%	Women's clinic	0.0%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	1.1%
Prosthetics	2.2%	Podiatry	1.1%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	0.0%
Other	22.2%	(examples: Dermatology, Eye Clinic, Audio)			

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the questions in the current survey (R1).

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at the Pershing VA was mostly positive but showed an opportunity for improvement. Veterans' concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	44.4%
Mostly Agree:	17.8%

Neutral:	11.1%
Mostly Disagree:	7.8%
Strongly Disagree:	18.9%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 56 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that scheduling their appointment was easy. Veterans who expressed concerns often mentioned that, due to staff shortages, appointments may be cancelled or rescheduled multiple times when one provider's schedule changes. Other veterans indicated discontent with the scheduling call system that requires a veteran to leave a message with the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, even though they utilize one of the Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs).

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"It took 9 months to get that appointment, they sent me an appointment notice and then called and cancelled it 3 times before I actually got in to see the doctor. He wanted to see me in 3 months for follow-up, no appointment notice was sent. At 6 months I called and they told me I had to wait for the new doctor to get there. In the meantime my doctor was arrested ...They finally made me an appointment..."*
- *"I was automatically scheduled for an annual follow-up in Dermatology."*
- *"I also work at Ozarks Medical Center. When we call for a follow up appointment, we get transferred to Poplar Bluff which then sends an email to schedule an appointment. For our Veterans who are patients that are being discharged to home, this is unacceptable."*

Recommendation: Continue to hire new staff and fill vacancies, especially in specialty areas and at the CBOCs, in order to reduce scheduling delays and changes. Consider a new scheduling system that allows veterans to speak directly to the VA facility that they utilize and ensures veterans receive timely and precise responses to the messages they leave.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, Poplar Bluff, MO has increased approximately 26 FTEE (fulltime equivalent employees) over the past twelve months and continues to hire staff to fill vacancies and enhance services. The first and second quarters of FY 15 saw an increase of approximately 12 employees, with 80-100% of these occurring within 60 days, in keeping with VA's "Speed of Hire" goals. Compliance with the VHA scheduling processes is a top priority and we anticipate national implementation of a new scheduling system. Currently 91.15% of appointments are scheduled within 30 days, and nationwide audits of the medical center are routinely conducted to assure compliance. Each Patient-Aligned Care Team (PACT) has a phone number designated for Veterans to reach their primary care teams and patients are able

to schedule appointments directly with outpatient clinics as needed. An additional avenue for patients to contact their health care teams is MyHealtheVet's Secure Messaging and 97.2 percent of these messages are responded to within the established timeframe of 3 business days.

2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

The reported ease of access to the appointment location was decidedly positive. Veterans' concerns were noted.

I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	65.6%
Mostly Agree:	11.1%
Neutral:	8.9%
Mostly Disagree:	2.2%
Strongly Disagree:	12.2%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 69 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that finding their way to their appointment was easy. Most veterans expressed satisfaction with the directions provided in reminder correspondence or by staff in the building. Veterans who expressed concerns pointed out that more directional signs and additional staff dedicated to greeting and directing would be helpful.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Few more signs at elevator."*
- *"The letter I received from the dermatology office gave very specific information as to the location I needed to report to for my examination."*
- *"The appointments do not specify floor or room number, when walking into the reception area often no one is there, when walking into the check in area often no one is interested in helping."*

Recommendation: Increase the number of greeters and ensure someone is always available to meet patients and provide directions. Continue to empower all staff to communicate with veterans at the facility to ensure they know where they are going.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center has begun the process of redesigning our appointment letters. The new letters will have increased flexibility for greater clarification regarding description of appointment locations. We have also recently installed new digital signage, which includes three way finding signs. Patients will be able to select the location they desire and learn how best to go there through the interactive system. In addition, facility leadership is exploring the possibility of new internal signage. A (new) volunteer in the main lobby has been very effective in providing guidance to those seeking various departments, and the summer youth volunteer program will station guides at each entrance, to escort Veterans to their destinations. Also, a new patient information guide will soon be available for Veterans, and it includes a map and other way finding assistance. Finally, the director has made clear our expectation of employees with respect to assisting/escorting Veterans to their destinations. This is part of the facility's ICARE (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence) strategy.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

The reported cleanliness of facilities in the Poplar Bluff region was strong. Veterans' concerns were noted.

At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	53.3%
Mostly Agree:	25.6%
Neutral:	12.2%
Mostly Disagree:	2.2%
Strongly Disagree:	6.7%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 71 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the facility was clean at the time of their visit. Only 8 respondents strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the facility was clean. While overall veterans are satisfied with the level of cleanliness, those with concerns commented on high traffic areas that need extra attention. There were also a number of comments regarding the age of the facilities.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Waiting area and men's bathroom clean and neat."*
- *"Depends what floor you are on. Also what time of day."*

- *“The facilities I have been to have been very clean but at the same time really showing their age.”*

Recommendation: Continue working to make sure housekeeping monitors high-traffic areas, especially during busy times of the day. Make telephone numbers visible for veterans to call when areas need attention.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

For a time, Environmental Management Service (Housekeeping) had unfilled vacancies. These vacancies have been filled and additional new positions have been approved. We expect improvements in cleanliness with this increased staffing. Signage will be installed identifying the phone number to report spills and areas needing attention.

4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider

The reported amount of time in between requesting an appointment and seeing a provider was mixed and is an area that needs improvement. While over half of veterans had a positive response, over one-fifth (1/5) strongly disagreed that their wait time was reasonable. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	47.8%
Mostly Agree:	13.3%
Neutral:	8.9%
Mostly Disagree:	7.8%
Strongly Disagree:	22.2%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 55 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the time between requesting an appointment and seeing a provider was reasonable. However, 27 veterans strongly or mostly disagreed that the wait time was reasonable, making this an area that should be prioritized for improvement. Veterans with concerns attributed the delay to staffing levels.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Required X-ray was done in December. First appointment/information from care giver was scheduled in March.”*

- *“I was scheduled for an appointment to see a dermatologist within two weeks of my first requesting that I be given an appointment.”*
- *“I had to wait 30 days to get this appointment and then halfway through the 30 days I got a call from the nurse and the doctor need to reschedule because they had something else going on so I had to get an appointment farther away.”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire new staff and quickly fill vacancies so that there are more appointment options and fewer scheduling changes for veterans. Implement a system that monitors wait times for different types of care at each facility and ensure that necessary adjustments are made in those areas to reduce wait times.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, Poplar Bluff, MO has been hiring new staff within the “speed of hire” timeframes established by VA. In addition, a system is in place to monitor wait times for different types of care at each facility (we publish the information monthly to the public website), and 90.15% of wait times are 30 days or less. The facility has implemented the Veterans Choice Act, and if patients cannot be scheduled within the required 30 days, they are referred to the Veterans Choice program.

5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

The reported clarity of communication by VA staff was mixed. While nearly half of veterans strongly agreed that VA staff communicated well and clearly, the other half were distributed fairly evenly among the positive, negative, and neutral options. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	48.9%
Mostly Agree:	14.4%
Neutral:	11.1%
Mostly Disagree:	11.1%
Strongly Disagree:	14.4%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 57 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated well and clearly at the Pershing VA. Veterans with concerns often mentioned a lack of follow up communication, especially with regard to scheduling an additional

procedure and learning the results of a test. Additionally, veterans frequently pointed out that communication between facilities was poor. This resulted in delayed or rescheduled appointments and a high level of stress and confusion for veterans who had been referred to a new facility.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My only complaint with the VA is that they aren't real good about communicating test results with me.”*
- *“The staff at Farmington Clinic and Pershing Medical Center are professional, courteous and on time. The nurse practitioner explained test results and lab work, and information on all prescriptions given.”*
- *“On April 10, I made a phone call to find out what is going on with my spine. The doctor's nurse was out sick, but that is not the reason of my complaint. I was sent out to St. Francis hospital in Cape Girardeau for an MRI and I am not sure at all that my primary care doctor knows what is going on with it. At first the nurse did not seem to know that doctor R. had sent me to the MRI, the nurse seemed to think I had gone off on my own. The last I heard of it, St. Francis Hospital had apparently sent a report of the results to Poplar Bluff but not the films, and the films seem to be needed. I was told I have stenosis of the spine, and I assume it is the lumbar region, but I can get no confirmation of that. I was told on approximately the first of April that another care giver would be looking at the films, but that is all I have heard. ...no new appointment that I have been informed of.”*

Recommendation: Train all staff on the importance of clear, consistent communication within VA facilities and between the VA and veterans. Assemble a veterans’ advisory panel, comprised of veterans, caregivers, and VA staff, to identify areas where communication can be improved. Ensure that veterans know what avenues exist to make constructive comments about the VA and that these veterans receive a timely response regarding their comments.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

All new employees receive customer service training in New Employee Orientation, and all other employees take a mandatory customer service refresher training each year. Our executive leadership team and supervisors regularly “round for outcomes” throughout the hospital and clinics. Facility leadership also meets monthly with Veteran Service Officers and other key stakeholders to share information and obtain feedback. Additional advisory groups sponsored by Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women’s Health, and Caregiver Support provide feedback on medical center services. From their feedback we have implemented several process improvements related to communication, Veteran satisfaction, using cloth gowns for women Veterans, and communicating laboratory results. Patient advocate contact information is readily available via digital signage, and staff refer patients with comments and concerns to the patient advocate as needed. MyHealtheVet includes Secure Messaging that facilitates

communication between the patient and their health care team(s), and also allows them to check their lab results and other clinical tests through the online program.

6. Receiving necessary care during visit to VA facility

The reported receipt of necessary care during the visit to the VA was strong. Veterans' concerns were noted.

I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	51.1%
Mostly Agree:	20.0%
Neutral:	6.7%
Mostly Disagree:	8.9%
Strongly Disagree:	13.3%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 64 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to receive the care they needed during their visit to a VA facility. Veterans with concerns noted poor communication and feeling disrespected by providers. The most commonly referenced concern was made by veterans who requested an appointment but felt that the provider did not fully address the veteran's stated reason for visiting the provider.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I received absolutely no treatment. I suffer from chronic rheumatoid arthritis. The person I saw refused to provide any treatment or medications to treat my chronic pain."*
- *"I left feeling confident that my medical issues were being addressed thoroughly and completely. I felt everyone was taking an interest in my situation and giving me their full attention while I was in their presence."*
- *"Do not really think the Doctor cared much about doing anything for me. It was like when I was in the Army. It was like I was just taking up his time, and he did or said nothing that was of any help to me. Except for a Flu shot this year, I have never been back."*

Recommendation: Train all staff on the importance of clear, consistent communication with veterans in a manner that is always respectful and caring. Ensure that staff take the time to answer all of veterans' questions and address the issues that concern the veteran. Ensure that veterans know what avenues exist to make constructive comments about their care and that these veterans receive a timely response regarding their comments.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, Poplar Bluff, MO will continue to train staff on the importance of clear, respectful communication with all of our Veterans, and regularly emphasize the ICARE values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence.) John J. Pershing VA Medical Center is also piloting "whole health appointments" for new patients, which last for one hour. This allows teams to spend more time getting to know patients and their unique needs. Our patient advocate visited each primary care team recently to discuss patient satisfaction survey information, and action plans to improve provider satisfaction. Contact information to provide feedback is provided on digital signage, in the new patient information guide and on "Patient Advocate Liaison" information throughout the facility.

7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown to veterans at the Pershing VA was strong. Veterans' concerns were noted.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	56.7%
Mostly Agree:	17.8%
Neutral:	7.8%
Mostly Disagree:	5.6%
Strongly Disagree:	12.2%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 67 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. While there appears to be an overall culture of respect at the Pershing VA, a number of instances of apathetic treatment by VA staff were noted. Almost all veterans who were dissatisfied with the level of respect they were shown expressed concern that VA staff made them feel ignorant.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I went to urgent care to get some relief from the pain in my left shoulder. The nurse in charge of the urgent care started making jokes about how I was falling apart while I was trying to explain how I had been trying to get help with my right shoulder since May and with the torn rotator cuff in my left shoulder since June. Still haven' got anything done about these issues..."*

- “Every employee said a greeting, asked if they could help or waited for me to 'go first' - (example; elevator).”
- “While most of the low level staff and the technicians are congenial and friendly, the administration and many of the Doctors make me feel as though they feel I am some sort of leach, or second class citizen.”

Recommendation: Strengthen the culture of respect and quality customer service, particularly among doctors and administration, through frequent trainings and other methods. Implement a system that provides recourse to veterans who comment about the level of respect they were shown. Continue to recognize those employees and volunteers who show exceptional customer service and care, and work with employees who need development so they can respond respectfully and effectively in any given interaction with a Veteran.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Respect is one of Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center’s ICARE values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence) and we train frequently on the importance of respecting Veterans. All employees are required to annually reaffirm their commitment to ICARE values. Regular messages go out to staff about respect and ICARE, and special certificates are presented in staff meetings to those who model these values. Staff also utilize their supervisors and the Patient Advocate to help resolve issues when patients are not satisfied.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

The reported willingness to recommend the Pershing VA to other veterans was mixed. While over half of veterans strongly agreed that they would recommend the Poplar Bluff region VA facilities, nearly a quarter of veterans disagreed that they would do so. This is an area to prioritize for improvement. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	52.2%
Mostly Agree:	10.0%
Neutral:	13.3%
Mostly Disagree:	5.6%
Strongly Disagree:	18.9%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 56 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend VA facilities in the Poplar Bluff region to other veterans. Veterans who would recommend the Pershing VA frequently note friendly staff, clear and consistent communication, and quality of care. Veterans who would not recommend the Pershing VA had several different reasons for their responses and often cited very specific, personal health issues and how they were treated. However, many of these veterans focused on a need for improvement in customer service, staffing, and responsiveness to veterans' requests and questions.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *"I am being served better and my health is better than before I switched to the VA."*
- *"My visits to the VA Hospital in PB and clinic in Sikeston have always been great. The staff is always friendly and helpful. The FPRN (Doc) inquires deeply, thinks about my comments and then asks me the questions required by the VA. I really don't see how they can be improved upon. My time with the nurse and the "Doc" are more than adequate. They put my civilian doctors to shame. They always finish the visit wanting to know if there is anything else they can do for me. Back in the 70s a visit to PB was a horror experience."*
- *"This round of visits was very pleasant and reassuring that I was being taken care of."*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *"They are not adequately staffed and refuse to prescribe the only pain medication (after trying about 10 different ones) that works for me."*
- *"Numerous errors have been made in my medical records, which after a year of conversations, has still not been corrected. If tests are ordered, I have found that after waiting to hear about results for 4 weeks, I go to records and get my results. This leads to not always understanding the information. Medications that I was on during active duty are not available to me now, even after medical proof that the med VA put me on did not work."*
- *"It is too easy to get lost or put on the "back burner." The PCP blames it on work load but I don't know about that. I have a germination in my back and 2 bulging discs and it took me a very long time to get anything done, and all I hear now is 'you're too young for surgery, so take these pills that don't work...'"*

<p>Recommendation: Continue to hire new staff and fill vacancies in order to give each veteran sufficient time to receive needed care and communication with their provider. Train all staff to provide clear, respectful, and responsive communication with veterans. Make sure veterans are aware of avenues they can utilize to directly express their concerns regarding their treatment and ensure each veteran receives an appropriate response regarding their concerns.</p>
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VA Medical Center's Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, Poplar Bluff, MO has increased approximately 26 FTEE (fulltime equivalent employees) over the past twelve months and continues to hire staff to fill vacancies and enhance services. The first and second quarters of FY 15 saw an increase of approximately 12 employees, with 80-100% of these occurring within 60 days in keeping with "Speed of Hire" goals. All new employees receive customer service training in New Employee Orientation, and all other employees take mandatory customer service refresher training each year. Digital signage and the new patient information guide include specifics about who Veterans may contact with concerns.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

The reported satisfaction with a personal doctor and nurse was mixed and should be a priority for improvement. Although most veterans had positive experiences with VA medical staff, a large number of veterans had varying levels of dissatisfying or neutral experiences. Veterans' concerns were noted.

How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R1
Excellent:	40.0%
Above Average (Good):	16.7%
Average/Fair:	18.9%
Below Average:	8.9%
Poor:	15.6%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 51 indicating that their overall experience with their personal doctor or nurse was Excellent or Above Average. Veterans who were dissatisfied with their experience commonly suggested improvements in wait times, responsiveness to the veteran, understandable communication, and respect.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"The Nurses are usually very thorough and helpful. I generally spend about 5 to 10 minutes with my Dr. (for my annual "Physical"). He usually tells me virtually nothing, unless I can remember what to ask him, such as my PSA numbers, etc. Also never discusses any of my past or ongoing medical conditions. Pretty much just renews all my prescriptions, shakes my hand and leaves. Otherwise, seems to be a nice guy, I could probably go fishing with him and have an enjoyable day."*

- *“He rushed through everything.”*
- *“My PCP and her nurse seem to try very hard, and are nice people. I’m not happy with the untimely manner in which it takes to get anything done, but when they do see you, they try to help the best they can.”*

Recommendation: Continuously train all staff, especially doctors, in clear, respectful, and responsive communication with veterans. Hire more staff and fill vacancies so that veterans can spend more time with their doctor or nurse and more efficiently schedule future appointments. Implement a system that establishes and tracks follow-up response times to veterans’ questions and concerns.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

As described above, we continuously work to improve our communication practices through ICARE values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence.) We have a number of Veteran advisory panels who will provide recommendations and feedback. There is a system in place to track and trend comments and concerns.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

The reported overall experience at VA facilities in the Poplar Bluff region was mixed. Though more than half of veterans reported positive overall experiences, a large number of veterans indicated their overall experience at a level of Average or below. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R1
Excellent:	33.3%
Above Average (Good):	23.3%
Average/Fair:	16.7%
Below Average:	10.0%
Poor:	16.7%

Ninety (90) veterans responded to this question with 51 stating that their experience at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region was Excellent or Above Average. These results suggest there is room for improvement with respect to veterans’ overall experience at the Pershing VA. While the reasons for their concerns varied, veterans who had a negative experience commented on the level of respect shown by VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Seems like you have to be really persistent to get [anything] done and requires a lot of contact with hospital.”*
- *“Not enough care given my health problems.”*
- *“I am in my late 50s, and have experienced health care on many fronts, through numerous providers, public and private. I must say, the care I have received at the John J. Pershing center is among the highest and best I have received from any provider! This is an outstanding facility.”*

Recommendation: Since the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program is an ongoing survey, develop a workgroup comprised of area veteran leaders, VA staff, and veterans’ organizations to help implement the recommendations received from multiple sources, including the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program. Implement a system that establishes and tracks follow-up response times to veterans’ questions and concerns.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Our executive leadership team and supervisors regularly “round for outcomes” throughout the hospital and clinics. Facility leadership also meets monthly with Veteran Service Officers and other key stakeholders to share information and obtain feedback. Additional advisory groups sponsored by Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women’s Health, and Caregiver Support provide feedback on medical center services. From their feedback we have implemented several process improvements related to communication, Veteran satisfaction, using cloth gowns for women Veterans, and communicating laboratory results. There is a system in place to track and trend comments and concerns.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current summary report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section includes some recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this summary report. All comments were provided to the VA.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Need more doctors, especially specialists such as psychiatrists, podiatrists, chiropractors, etc."*
- *"Have to call and then choose from dates available. Ended up with spilt appointments: 1 at 10:30 am to draw blood after fasting. 2nd appointment saw Doctor. [I] think [I] should see Doctor prior to getting labs drawn, but they need to draw blood in the morning to get to Poplar Bluff in a timely manner. They need to review this system. Could have had it the other way if I wanted to wait a month longer."*
- *"They need more parking."*
- *"Provide more services and providers so Veterans don't have to travel 2 or more hours one way to get an x-ray or something else which takes 30 minutes or less."*
- *"Provide a reasonable level of care to your patients. I suffer serious pain every day and the doctor refused to help."*

Veteran Response:

On May 6, 2015, the Poplar Bluff VAMC met with Veterans Advisory Board members, Michael Clark, Robert Wake, Ray Aubuchon and Amanda Hendrix to discuss the results of the survey and the medical center's response. Below are comments with regard to questions in addition to the advisory board approvals to recommendations and responses submitted by both Senator McCaskill and the VA.

Comments from VA Advisory Board from May 6, 2015 meeting:

Question 2: Mr. Clark: – *"employees are very helpful."*

Mr. Wake: – *"the VA needs to stop moving things around."*

Miss Hendrix: *“including information on how people know where the “way-finding” signs are is good.”*

Question 3: All board members agreed that the facility is aging. Overall, it is very clean, but sometimes employees lack respect for the housekeepers and the important job they do.

Mr. Wake: *“is more common to see a housekeeper cleaning a bathroom than a patron actually using it.”*

Question 4: Mr. Wake: *“often the wait times are because doctors take extended leave. Being from another country, when they vacation, it tends to be lengthy.”*

Question 5: Miss Hendrix: *“their accents are hard to understand. And the communication from docs may simply be, “You’re fat.” These responses lack diplomacy.”*

Mr. Aubuchon: *“they need better communication between VA and non-VA providers.”*

Advisory board: – *“when you get an auto-call appointment reminder and push “(whatever number)” that you can’t make it, the system says they will contact you to confirm. Instead, you get a no-show letter. This problem inside the system should be addressed immediately.”*

Mr. Aubuchon: *“there really needs to be someone designated for follow-up issues.”*

The board agreed at least 90% that the survey results/responses were correct and while overall the VA service provided is good, there is always room for improvement.



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Is there a provider or a department that does an excellent job that you would like Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in the Columbia region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Sixty-Three (63) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"I have lots of blood work done and I have very small veins. The lab techs always use the most care (patient, needle size). They slow down when there is more than 5 tubes at one sitting and look at me when they speak. Lab is great."*
- *"S.M., FNP, is my personal care provider. She is excellent! L.W., LPN, is a nurse in Primary Care who has gone above and beyond in helping me during emergency care (heart palpitations, thought I was having a heart attack), and in helping me navigate the VA system."*
- *"The guys at the front counter, who make the appointments, are the most courteous and helpful and every time I have gone in there they have bent over backwards to solve my problems. This is at the West Plains clinic. The nurses and the doctors or nurse practitioners have always done their best to meet my needs and I greatly appreciate all they have done for me. I thank you for giving me this platform for which I'm able to give them the shout out that I feel they more than deserve."*
- *"Social worker J is very professional and personable. She treats me with respect and does not judge me for what I tell her."*
- *"AUDIO - Hearing Dr. S at John J. Pershing Poplar Bluff MO. (EXCEPTIONAL)"*
- *"Dr. G.W.'s team does an excellent job, and is responsive to my requests."*
- *"Floor 3, T, L, V, and C. Thumbs UP!! They go far and beyond their job. They treat you like family. Police officer C.A. Floor 5, B.R. Absolutely a professional and personable person. Floor 1, J.W. primary care receptionist. Great responder and polite."*

Recommendation: The Pershing VA is fortunate to have so many competent, compassionate professionals. Reward and acknowledge superior employees for their service and job well-done.

VA Medical Center's Response:

We acknowledge that employees are the foundation to our success and continuously strive to make the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center and clinics the “employer of choice” for the best and brightest, most talented, and patient-focused colleagues who put Veterans first. Each year we reward our team members with performance awards, special contribution awards and other special recognitions for achievement.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Poplar Bluff region is off to a good start. This Summary Report details ways the VA can improve veterans' experiences at the Pershing VA medical facilities. This is part of a series of steps the VA is taking to continue improving veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a Summary Report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns at these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' experiences at the Pershing VA facilities.

Overall, feedback from Poplar Bluff area veterans was positive. However, it was clear from the surveys that there is room to improve veterans' experiences at the Pershing VA. The VA has provided responses that indicate that they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are continuing to implement procedures, policies and training to address customer service skill development, appointment scheduling and way-finding at the VA facilities, as well as improved communication with veterans. The Pershing VA's network of veteran stakeholders and advocates is an asset for the VA and a positive approach for providing veterans the quality customer service they deserve.

In order to maintain this momentum, we need to continue working together to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the Summary Reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

Special thanks to the members of veterans' service organizations who assisted in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program: Trista Corbin, Dewey Riehn, Kimberly Tatham, Rick Kitchen, Fred Juettner, John Glynn and Gary Powell.